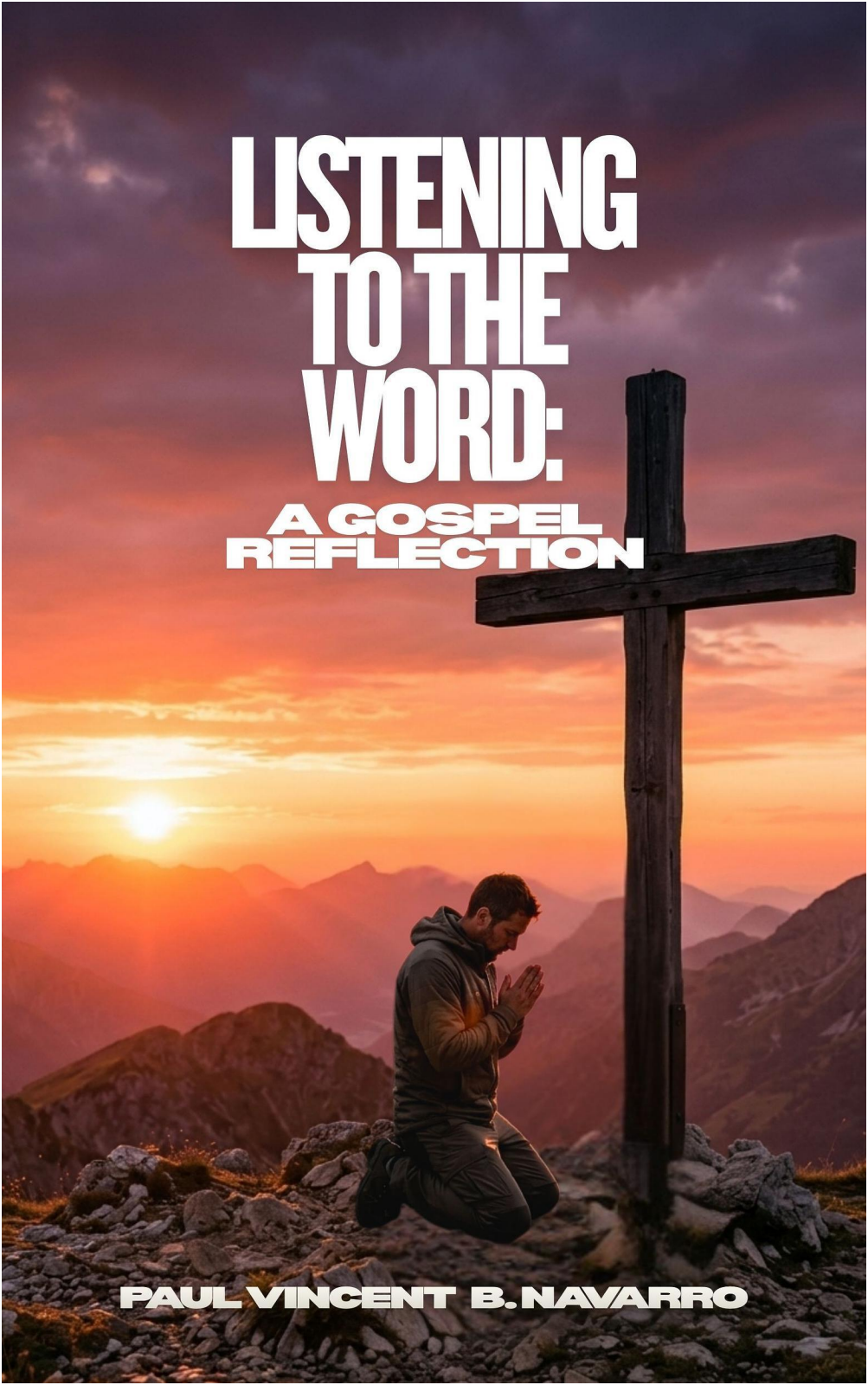
LISTENING TO THE WORD:
A GOSPEL REFLECTION
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Listening to the Word: A Gospel Reflection

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This work is dedicated to all my readers.

To those who seek truth, justice, and hope in the midst of the many struggles of our world. These reflections are offered as a humble invitation to pause, to listen, and to reflect more deeply on the Word of God and its meaning in our lives today.

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Preface

This collection of reflections was written out of a desire to listen more deeply to the Word of God and to see how it speaks to the realities of our world today. The Gospel is not only a message from the past; it continues to challenge, comfort, and guide us in the present. In every age, the Word invites us to look at our lives, our society, and our responsibilities with honesty and faith.

The reflections gathered in these pages attempt to bring the message of the Gospel into conversation with the struggles and hopes of our time. Some of them engage difficult realities such as injustice, suffering, stigma, and the search for truth. Others explore themes of mercy, faith, hope, and the call to live with integrity. Through these reflections, the Gospel becomes not only something to read, but something to wrestle with, pray about, and live.

Several reflections are inspired by specific Gospel passages, such as the powerful image of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25, where Christ reminds us that whatever we do to the least of our brothers and sisters, we do to Him. This message challenges believers to recognize Christ in the poor, the suffering, and the forgotten. It also reminds us that faith is not only about believing, but about responding with compassion, justice, and love.

These writings do not claim to provide perfect answers. Rather, they are attempts to reflect, to question, and to seek understanding in the light of the Gospel. They come from moments of prayer, study, and reflection, often shaped by the realities of our society and the call of the Church to stand with those who suffer.

It is my hope that these reflections may encourage readers to pause, think, and encounter the Word of God in a deeper way. May they inspire us to listen more attentively to the cries of our brothers and sisters, to remain faithful to truth and integrity, and to live the Gospel not only in words but also in action.

Above all, may these reflections remind us that the Gospel continues to speak to our time, inviting us to follow Christ with courage, mercy, and hope.

Chapter 1: Sheep Among the Shadows: Mercy, Judgment, and the Cry for Justice in the Philippine Drug War (A Reflection on Matthew 25:31-46)

As I read the latest reports on the drug war victims cases like Kian delos Santos and the slow grind of accountability my heart feels heavy. The original GMA article highlighted how, out of thousands killed during the Duterte administration's controversial campaign (official figures around 7,640 in police operations from 2016–2022, though watchdogs estimate up to 30,000), only a handful have seen real justice. That reality still lingers today, and it stirs something deep in me as someone who grew up in this country, hearing the promises of safety mixed with stories of fear and loss.

The rare breakthroughs stand out sharply

For Kian delos Santos, the 17-year-old killed in 2017 during an anti-drug operation in Caloocan City, three police officers Arnel Oares, Jeremias Pereda, and Jerwin Cruz were convicted of murder. In December 2025, the Supreme Court upheld that conviction, sentencing them to "reclusion perpetua" (up to 40 years without parole) and ordering them to pay the family PHP 275,000 in damages. I remember the shock of the CCTV footage back then: a defenseless boy dragged, forced to his knees, and executed. He could have been any young person someone's son, someone's brother. Other cases echo this: convictions for murder, torture, and planting evidence in the deaths of Carl Angelo Arnaiz and Reynaldo "Kulot" de Guzman; homicide rulings for the father-and-son killings of Luis and Gabriel Bonifacio. Yet these are exceptions in a sea of impunity. Most officers claimed they were "just

doing their job," following orders in a system that seemed to demand results at any cost

Among the shadows of conflict, the Lamb stands quietly — a sign that innocence, mercy, and hope still call for justice.

Now, former President Rodrigo Duterte faces the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague. The confirmation of charges hearing ran from February 23–27, 2026, where prosecutors presented evidence of crimes against humanity, including a pattern of killings tied to his "war on drugs." Duterte waived attendance for parts of it, citing age and health, but the process moved forward. Prosecutors highlighted cases like Kian's to show how even minors were targeted under operations like "Project Tokhang." After the hearing, judges have up to 60 days to decide if the case proceeds to trial. As someone who once heard his tough promises on the news, I feel a mix of hope that accountability might reach higher levels and frustration that it's taken so long for so many families.

This hits me personally. Growing up Filipino, I've known people affected friends who lost relatives, communities gripped by fear during those years. Whispers of nighttime visits, sudden disappearances, wrongful labels as addicts. It makes me wonder: If it had been someone close to me, would I have spoken up sooner? The silence I sometimes kept, the way many of us normalized the violence as "necessary," weighs on my conscience.

This brings me to the Gospel passage at the heart of this reflection: Matthew 25:31-46, the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. Jesus describes the final judgment, separating people as a shepherd divides sheep from goats. The sheep inherit the kingdom for feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the imprisoned because "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (v. 40). The goats face condemnation for neglecting these acts: "Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me" (v. 45).

To me, the drug war victims embody "the least of these." Many were poor, young, from marginalized community people already struggling, not powerful criminals. Kian and others weren't given chances for mercy or due process; instead, they faced summary executions, planted evidence, torture. That's the opposite of feeding, clothing, or caring it's stripping away dignity and life. When systems or leaders prioritized elimination over compassion, it mirrors the goats' failure to see and serve Christ in the vulnerable.

But the parable also offers hope and a call to action. The convictions, the damages to families, the ICC proceedings show people choosing to act like sheep: seeking justice, restoring some dignity, standing with the suffering. Advocating for victims, supporting their

families, pushing for reform (like rehabilitation over punishment) these are ways to "do for the least."

Personally, this passage convicts me. As a Christian in the Philippines, I've prayed for peace and attended services, but have I truly lived this out? Have I done enough to listen to affected families, share resources, or speak against injustice? Sometimes I feel I've leaned toward the goats through indifference or fear of speaking up. The Gospel doesn't allow neutrality; it demands we see Christ in the marginalized and respond with mercy.

This reflection isn't just about past events or ongoing trials, it's about who I choose to be now. Amid lingering struggles with drugs, poverty, and violence, Matthew 25 urges me toward greater compassion, courage, and action. I want to move from passive observer to someone who helps clothe the naked in dignity and visit the imprisoned in spirit. Because loving the least is loving Christ and that's the justice the Gospel calls us all to pursue.

Chapter 2: From the Cross to the Grandstand: Christ the King and the Cry for Justice

Last November 23, 2025, the Church celebrated the Solemnity of Christ the King and proclaimed the Gospel of the Crucified King (Luke 23:35–43). In that scene, the leaders sneered, the soldiers mocked, and one of the criminals blasphemed. Yet from the throne of the Cross, Jesus exercised the fullest expression of royal power: He forgave, He promised paradise, and He revealed that true kingship is measured not by domination but by mercy and truth. Four days earlier, on November 22, more than ten thousand faithful in Dasmariñas, Cavite lived out the meaning of that same feast. Gathered at the City Grandstand under the leadership of Bishop Reynaldo Evangelista, they transformed the celebration of Christ the King into a prayer rally for good governance, transparency, and accountability. The connection between Calvary and that grandstand could not have been clearer: the King who was mocked by corrupt powers continues to be mocked today whenever public trust is crucified for private gain.

The bishop's words cut like the spear that pierced the side of Christ: "People are tired of officials who think only of themselves… If someone needs to be jailed, then they should be jailed. We will no longer remain silent." Those were not the words of a politician looking for votes; they were the words of a shepherd who refuses to watch the flock be devoured while wolves hide behind immunity and privilege. In the Gospel, the good thief acknowledged the truth: "We have been condemned justly… but this man has done nothing wrong." Bishop Evangelista, in the same spirit, called the people to acknowledge the truth about the anomalies that plague our nation and to demand that justice be done—no exceptions, no sacred cows, no more excuses.

Christ's Kingship

As Saint Paul wrote to the Colossians, is the kingdom into which we have been transferred (Col 1:12–20). It is a kingdom where everything is reconciled in Him, where the image of the invisible God rules not by force but by self-emptying love. Yet every time public funds disappear, every time contracts are rigged and the poor are left defenseless against typhoons and floods, that kingdom is rejected and another kingdom is enthroned: the kingdom of greed, secrecy, and impunity. The prayer rally was the Church's public act of allegiance to the Crucified King. By gathering in such great numbers, the faithful declared that they belong to the kingdom of the One who was mocked, stripped, and nailed to a cross rather than compromise with falsehood.

As a seminarian forming for priesthood and for the ministry of Christian communication, I cannot remain a spectator. The good thief's simple plea "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" is now the plea of millions of Filipinos who suffer the consequences of bad governance. Our keyboards, cameras, and voices must become instruments of that same plea. We are called to remember the poor when budgets are debated, to remember the victims of corruption when officials boast of their achievements, and to remember the Crucified King when power tries to silence truth.

The Solemnity of Christ the King is never meant to be a private devotion or a beautiful closing to the liturgical year. It is a revolutionary proclamation: Jesus alone is King, and every earthly authority will be judged by how it reflected or rejected His rule of justice, mercy, and truth. The prayer rally in Dasmariñas was a foretaste of that final judgment a moment when the People of God stood up and said, "Enough. We recognize only one King, and His reign demands that the poor be protected, the truth be told, and the guilty be held accountable."

May the Crucified and Risen King who heard the good thief from the throne of the Cross continue to hear the cry rising from our nation. May He grant us the courage to dismantle every structure that crucifies the common good. And may He remember us leaders and citizens alike when He comes into the fullness of His kingdom, so that the Philippines may finally become a place where the last, the least, and the lost are served first.

"Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat!"

Chapter 3: Woe If I Do Not Preach: HIV, Stigma, and the Urgent Gospel of Mercy and Healing

Last December 7, I watched a short DZMM Teleradyo clip. Dr. Rontgene Solante, an infectious disease expert, said that by the end of this month, around 252,800 Filipinos might be living with HIV. I just stared at the screen. That number felt too big, too close, too real especially since new cases are up 22% in the last quarter, with over 5,583 reported from July to September alone. The Philippines now has one of the fastest-growing HIV epidemics in Asia Pacific, with about 61 new diagnoses every day.

The readings from the past few days suddenly made sense in a new way

St. Paul said, "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16). He was telling us that keeping quiet is not an option when people are hurting. He even made himself "weak with the weak" just to reach them. I thought: right now, a lot of people with HIV feel weak—weak because of sickness, weak because others judge them. Young people aged 15-34 make up most new cases, with 96% from sexual contact, and stigma keeps many from getting tested early. If Paul felt he had to speak up, I think we do too. We can't just scroll past the news and pretend it's not our problem. Sharing correct information, supporting testing centers, or even just refusing to laugh at cruel jokes that's already preaching the Gospel in a simple way.

Then Psalm 27 became my prayer: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear?" Many who are positive are afraid—afraid of what their family will say, afraid of being rejected, afraid that God is mad at them. But the same God who gives me courage on my bad days is the same God who walks with them. Only 55% of people with HIV are even diagnosed here, and just 40% have the virus under control with treatment. I just kept repeating, "Lord,

be their light too."

The Gospel showed me what Jesus actually does with people who are scared and suffering. Two blind men kept shouting after him, "Have pity on us!" Jesus didn't ignore them or shame them. He asked, "Do you believe I can help you?" When they said yes, he touched their eyes and they could see again. After that, they couldn't keep quiet they told everyone what Jesus did. I think that's what needs to happen now. Stigma is like blindness: it stops people from getting tested, from getting medicine, from feeling loved. Jesus still wants to touch lives today through doctors, through friends, through ordinary people like us who choose kindness instead of gossip.

And when someone feels that kindness, they usually can't keep quiet either. They become the ones who say, "I was so scared, but people cared, and God never left me." These readings are not just for Mass. They are for right now. Paul is pushing me to speak up. The psalm is reminding me that God is bigger than any diagnosis. The Gospel is showing me that real healing starts with faith and a simple touch of mercy. So I made a small promise while writing this: I will share at least one correct, kind post about HIV this week from reliable spots like the Department of Health reports or WHO updates. I will pray for everyone carrying that virus many of them younger than me. And I will try to be someone who helps others see that they are still loved, still valuable, still children of God.

"Because if I stay quiet when 252,800 people are hurting... then "woe to me."

Chapter 4: Weakness, Integrity, and the True Value of the Kingdom

The readings for today—taken from the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor 1:26–31), Psalm 23 (Ps 23:1b–3a, 4, 5, 6), and the Gospel according to Matthew (Mt 13:44–46)—offer a reflective framework for examining contemporary social issues related to integrity, responsibility, and justice. When these texts are placed alongside the recent news concerning fraud in the school voucher program, particularly the issue of "ghost students" reported by GMA News Online, they provide meaningful insight into how values are shaped and challenged in public life.

In the first reading, Saint Paul reminds the Corinthian community that many of them were not considered wise, powerful, or influential by societal standards (1 Cor 1:26–31). This observation highlights a recurring reality in human communities: systems often favor those with status and influence, while the weak and marginalized remain unnoticed. Paul emphasizes that worth should not be measured by external success or recognition. Instead, he calls attention to humility and accountability, stressing that no one should boast in personal achievement but recognize a higher moral responsibility beyond self-interest.

This message resonates strongly with the issue raised in the news regarding the misuse of the school voucher program. According to GMA News Online, Senator Bam Aquino called for stricter penalties against individuals and institutions involved in fraudulent practices, particularly the listing of non-existent or "ghost" students to illegally benefit from government funds. His response underscores the seriousness of the issue and highlights the need for accountability within systems designed to serve the most vulnerable sectors of society. Education programs exist to support real students—especially those from poor families—not to enrich those who manipulate the system.

The presence of "ghost students" reflects a troubling distortion of priorities. Instead of

focusing on genuine educational development, some institutions prioritize financial gain and compliance with paperwork over the actual welfare of students. This practice effectively silences the weak by replacing them with fabricated identities. In light of 1 Cor 1:26–31, such actions contradict the call to recognize and protect those who "count for nothing" in the eyes of society. Senator Bam Aquino's call for reform highlights an attempt to restore integrity and ensure that educational support reaches its intended beneficiaries.

Psalm 23 (Ps 23:1b–3a, 4, 5, 6) provides an ethical image of leadership grounded in care, guidance, and trust. The psalm describes leadership not as control or dominance, but as responsibility toward those who depend on guidance and protection. This imagery is especially relevant when evaluating public officials and institutional leaders. Leadership that fails to protect resources meant for the vulnerable leads communities into uncertainty and injustice, symbolized by the "dark valley" mentioned in the psalm.

Senator Bam Aquino's Intervention

In the context of the educational fraud issue, the psalm highlights what ethical leadership should look like: ensuring that systems function transparently and that assistance reaches those truly in need. Senator Bam Aquino's intervention reflects this sense of responsibility, emphasizing the need to safeguard public funds and restore trust in educational institutions. Without such accountability, public confidence erodes, and the common good is compromised.

The Gospel reading (Mt 13:44–46) further deepens this reflection by presenting two parables centered on value and choice. Both stories involve individuals who recognize something of great worth and are willing to give up everything else to obtain it. These parables illustrate the idea that true value requires commitment and sacrifice. What is truly important cannot be acquired through shortcuts or deception.

Applied to the current issue, the Gospel challenges both individuals and institutions to examine what they consider valuable. If integrity, justice, and human dignity are recognized as the highest values, then dishonest practices such as fabricating student records cannot be justified. The pursuit of material gain at the expense of ethical responsibility reflects a misplaced sense of value. The parables suggest that choosing what truly matters often requires letting go of immediate benefits in favor of long-term moral integrity.

Moreover, the joy described in the Gospel contrasts sharply with the fear-driven nature of fraudulent systems. Deception is sustained by fear of exposure and punishment, while ethical action fosters confidence and trust. Senator Bam Aquino's advocacy for stricter

penalties seeks not only to punish wrongdoing but to discourage a culture of dishonesty that undermines social institutions.

In conclusion, the readings collectively emphasize integrity, responsibility, and the proper recognition of human worth. When viewed alongside the issue of "ghost students," they challenge society to confront systems that prioritize appearance over substance and profit over people. Senator Bam Aquino's response highlights the role of ethical leadership in addressing such failures. Ultimately, the reflection calls for a renewed commitment to truth and justice, ensuring that programs meant to uplift the weak genuinely serve their purpose and contribute to the common good.

Chapter 5: Whispers of Hope: 'Little Girl, Arise' in Our Time

When I read the Gospel of Mark 5:21–43, especially the part where Jesus says, "Little girl, I say to you, arise," something in my heart felt very close and personal. Parang hindi lang siya kwento ng milagro noon, but a message that is still alive today. The scene is simple yet powerful a child who was already declared dead, a family full of grief, and then Jesus comes in and speaks just a few words. No long speech. No drama. Just a gentle command: Arise. And life returned.

What struck me most is not only the miracle itself, but the tenderness of Jesus. He called her "little girl." May lambing. May malasakit. It reminds me that God's power is not harsh or distant. It is compassionate and personal. Sometimes we think miracles must be loud and grand, but here, life was restored through a soft voice and a simple touch. It makes me reflect that maybe many of us are also like that little girl not physically dead, but tired, discouraged, or spiritually asleep. And Jesus is still whispering to us, "Bangon ka. Arise."

When I connected this Gospel to the news about the Manila Archbishop asking people to continue praying for integrity, truth, and justice, I realized that the message is very similar. At first, the news looked political or social, something outside my personal life. But the more I reflected, the more I saw that it is also about life being restored. Hindi lang katawan ang binubuhay, kundi ang konsensya ng lipunan.Today, many situations in our country can feel hopeless. We hear about corruption, misinformation, and injustice. Sometimes nakakapagod na makinig ng balita. It can feel like society itself is lying down, weak and tired, like that little girl in the Gospel. People lose trust. People become silent. People say, "Wala na yatang pag-asa." But the Archbishop's call to prayer is like echoing the same voice of Christ — Arise. It is a reminder that we should not give up on truth and justice just because it is difficult.

Personally, as a seminarian, this reflection hits me deeply. There are moments when I also feel small and powerless. I ask myself, Ano ba ang kaya kong gawin? I am just one person, still

studying, still learning. But the Gospel shows that even in a room full of doubters and mourners, Jesus still acted. He did not let the noise of negativity stop Him. That challenges me. Sometimes I allow doubts, fears, or even laziness to silence my faith. But Christ's words to the little girl feel like they are also meant for me "Paul, arise." Arise from fear. Arise from discouragement. Arise from spiritual sleep.

Source: Gospelimages. The raising of Jairus' daughter — a reminder that the voice of Christ calls us from despair into life.

The news about praying for integrity and justice also reminds me that prayer is not passive. Hindi ito pagtakas sa realidad. Prayer is not saying, "Bahala na si Lord." Instead, it is saying, "Lord, gamitin Mo ako." In the Gospel, Jairus did not just stay at home and hope. He went out, searched for Jesus, and humbled himself. The woman who was sick for twelve years did not remain in the corner; she pushed through the crowd. Their faith had action. Their prayer had movement.

Katotohanan, Integridad, at Hustisya

I realize that in my own life, prayer must also lead me to action even in small ways. Being honest in simple things. Respecting others. Speaking truth with kindness. These are not

grand miracles, but they are ways of "rising." The Archbishop's message is not only for leaders or politicians; it is also for ordinary people like me. Katotohanan, integridad, at hustisya begin in daily choices. In school, in community life, in conversations doon nagsisimula.

Another thing I noticed is that Jesus told the people not to make noise about the miracle. He focused on the life restored, not on the attention. That is also a lesson for me. Sometimes we want recognition when we do good. But true faith is quiet and sincere. Just like prayer hindi kailangan palaging makita ng iba. What matters is the sincerity of the heart.

In the end, this Gospel and the news together remind me that God is still speaking life into our world. The command "Arise" is not only for a little girl two thousand years ago. It is for families losing hope, for communities longing for justice, and even for me in my personal struggles. Whenever I feel spiritually tired or emotionally drained, I remember that Christ's voice is gentle but powerful. Hindi Siya sumisigaw, pero tumatagos sa puso.

Faith is not just Believing

This reflection leaves me with a simple but deep realization: faith is not just believing that Jesus can raise the dead; it is believing that He can raise me my courage, my honesty, my hope. And prayer for truth and justice is not only a national concern; it is also a personal mission. Every time I choose sincerity over convenience, kindness over anger, and truth over silence, I am responding to that same call, "Little girl, arise."

In my heart, I hear it now as, "Anak, bumangon ka." And I pray that each day, in small and quiet ways, I will.